The Fourth Church Pulpit

GOD IN THE PRESENT TENSE

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John M. Buchanan

All people complain that they haven't enough time ... There is always time to do what God wants us to do, but we must put ourselves completely into each moment that he offers us.

Lord, I have time,
I have plenty of time,
All the time that you give me,
The years of my life,
The days of my years,
The hours of my days,
They are all mine.
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,
But to fill completely, up to the brim,
To offer them to you, that of their insipid water
You may make a rich wine such as you made once in Cana of Galilee.
I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that,
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do.

Michael Quoist
Prayers

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Scripture
Isaiah 43:14-21
Matthew 3:13-17

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; ..."
Isaiah 43:18,19 (NRSV)

For Christians, the story of events which happened 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, in Jerusalem, are more than history. They are the story of how God once acted, and continues to act, within the human story.

For Christians, the story of Jesus is about the past, but more importantly, it is about the present — our present; and the future — our future.

Now, it is true that for Christians along with all other people, when the future looks frightening or even merely uncertain, it is tempting to take refuge in the past.

As one year ends and a new year begins, we find ourselves looking ahead and inevitably back to the past. There was more of it this year than usual, I thought. We're just four years away from the millennium, a date of great significance emotionally, if not historically. But even more important, this year the Baby Boomers begin turning fifty. The "trend setters" and "taste makers" who have dominated our lives will be joining the rest of us in looking forward with a little more concentrated attention, and backward with significantly increased nostalgia.

In fact, an interesting market phenomenon is already emerging because of this significant transition. Nostalgia is back in a big way. Volkswagen of America is beginning to market a new car, Concept One, due in the showroom around the year 2000. It is simply a sleeker version of the VW Beetle, the car which defined the Boomers in their young adulthood. Volkswagen of America is already overwhelmed with orders and inquiries. And — along with Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and other high tech gadgets —this Christmas was marked by a return of "nostalgia toys" — remembered fondly by Boomers, and their parents, I hasten to add. Particularly strong sellers this Christmas were Crayola Crayons, Etch-a-Sketch, Play Doh. I was particularly happy to learn that Mr. Potato Head experienced a big comeback.

A spokesperson for Trends Research Institute of Rye, New York said:

> "We're moving at an exponential rate of change. This whole technology revolution is unsettling to a lot of us. These times are so uncertain for so many people, they're looking to the past for some kind of anchor." [*New York Times*, 12/31/95, "It's The Era of Nostalgia With Legs"]

Looking ahead can be frightening — and difficult. Futurists are often crashingly wrong.

- *Time* (magazine) confidently predicted in 1966 that by the turn of the century technology and government programs will have made everybody wealthy. Ten percent of us would be working, the other 90 percent paid to be idle and how to use all our leisure meaningfully would be a major problem. We heard that over and over, did we not, declared with absolute confidence. The work week would be reduced. Productivity would increase and everybody would have more free time that they knew how to use.

- Buckminster Fuller, the distinguished futurist, predicted in 1960 that amid general plenty politics would fade away (an interesting idea at the moment).

- *Harper's* (magazine) predicted in 1942 that the home of the future would have a "health room" with ultra-violet panels in the walls so that everybody could enjoy the health benefits of daily exposure to ultra-violet rays and have beautiful tans. Sounds like a death trap today.

- David Reisman, a highly respected sociologist, said in 1967 that: "If anything remains more or less unchanged, it will be the role of women."

[*New York Times Magazine*, 12/24/95, "Endpaper, Yesterday's Tomorrow," Rose DeWolf]

Futurists are mostly negative about the human prospect. Faith Popcorn, whose market predictions are taken very seriously, says that Americans in the future will be "uncertain, unhappy, needy, afraid. Tired of being ripped off, laid off and mugged by life."

Popcorn, whose specialty is predicting what business and investment ventures are going to be profitable, suggests that people will buy into "Controlled Escape" — computers will take us on mind trips to Africa, the Brazilian rain forest, the Himalayas or time-travel us back to the French Revolution or to our own safe childhoods ..." [*The Popcorn Report*, p. 187]

The future looks so uncertain that a whole new category of books is crowding the shelves. *"The End of ..."* books, for example:

End of the American Century
End of the Nation
End of Culture
End of Marriage
End of Kinship
End of Architecture, Art Theory, Literary Theory, Education, Conversation, Science and Equality
End of the Future
End of the World Order
End of the World
[*Chicago Tribune*, 12/27/95]

When the future looks frightening, or even uncertain, it is tempting to focus on — retreat to — and do most of your living in the past. And that might be a viable thing to do except for the fact that you miss a lot of what's going on in the present. That can be dangerous.

Twenty-five-hundred years ago, one of the great prophets of Israel wrote to people who were doing just that: looking backward with such focused attentiveness that they were not seeing what was happening. They — the people — were the exiles, the captives, being held in Babylon, where they had lived for a whole generation. They didn't focus on the present; certainly they didn't look forward to the future because it was too awful — a tiny, oppressed minority, living far from home in an alien culture. When they looked ahead they saw, literally, the end. Their culture, religion, nationhood; their stories and customs — all of it was about to disappear and they couldn't bear to think about it. And so they lived in the past:

- they reminisced about how it used to be in the good old days;
- they told and retold the old stories;
- they lionized the figures of the past;

and the whole exercise probably enabled them to preserve something of their culture. But it was doing something else as well. It was blinding them — so that they couldn't see and paralyzing them so that they could not act.

The Prophet — the scholars know him as Second Isaiah because he is writing centuries after the person who wrote the first 39 chapters of Isaiah — the Prophet is a man of enormous poetic skill and deep theological insight. We remember his words at Advent, in the opening tenor aria of *Messiah*:

"Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye
My people, Says your God
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ...
Every valley shall be lifted up
And every mountain and hill be made low."

Great events were on the horizon and beginning to happen, but the captives were unable to see them and get ready to respond to them because they were living in the past.

And so the prophet wrote:

"Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

It is one of the most important themes in the Bible. God does new things. God's plan for creation is not yet complete. God's kingdom of justice and equality and compassion is coming, but not yet here. God continues to bring it. God's people, however, get stuck in the past, and while knowing what God has done, their obsession with the past, for whatever reason, causes them to miss what God is doing in the present tense.

The great Psalm (Psalm 98) we read this morning: "O sing to the Lord a new song," says it liturgically. The old song isn't adequate any longer. The old song is a lament, an expression of grief and despair and loneliness and exile and the people are so into that — they are about to miss the new thing God is doing which is their liberation, their freedom, their salvation.

At Christmas, we look back in time reflexively — recalling an event that took place nearly 2,000 years ago and lovingly, carefully, we preserve every part of our corporate memory: The Little Town of Bethlehem, The Shepherds, The Manger, The Holy Family. And we do much the same with our own Christmas customs, taking exquisite care to make certain everything remains the same year after year, the same kind of tree, the same decorations, the same order. When a minister arrives in a new church we have learned to be cautious about changing anything for awhile and we all learn, sooner or later, a fundamental rule of parish ministry — DMWC — "Don't Mess With Christmas."

Psalm 98 forces us to move our attention from past to present.

"Christmas, while commemorating what God did in the long ago at Bethlehem, is in reality the joyful celebration of what God is doing here and now ... Our carols of great gladness are not just over what God did at Bethlehem, but over what the reigning Christ does today to straighten that which is crooked in human life and to set right that which is fallen."
[Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, *Texts for Preaching*, p. 59]

It is hard to see sometimes. The present is so challenging and difficult, the future so uncertain and frightening, it is difficult to see signs of hope, indications of creativity and promise and justice and peace.

I was privileged to be in the Chicago audience when Secretary of Defense William Perry chose to spell out American policy and strategy in Bosnia. He explained the laborious process by which the political coalition was built to allow a sizeable NATO military force to be created and how important the Russian military was for the whole effort. The Russians initially would not place their forces under NATO command and a NATO general, but they would be willing to come in under American command. Perry — a life-long cold-warrior, whose career was built creating and implementing military strategy on the assumption that the Russians were our enemy who we would have to fight someday — said that never in his wildest imagination did he think there could be a day when Russian troops took their orders from an American general.

I suspect the same was true for the exiles in Babylon. They were too battered and bruised even to imagine a day when they would be free and home again.

"I have a dream," Martin Luther King proclaimed, and helped a whole generation of Americans see the real possibility of a new thing springing forth, a new reality, an emerging future in which people of all races would live together in peace and justice and harmony.

It is a topic of major importance for our nation. Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain, who wrote an important book, *Democracy on Trial*, recently said in an interview that our future depends on our willingness to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of rebuilding the institutions that hold us together as a nation:

- our schools
- our churches
- our civic organizations and service clubs.

The temptation, of course, is to look back and not at the present:

> "Mid-century greatness and triumph are behind us" she said. "I fear it corrupts us to long for the restoration of that precise moment and a grand articulation of our prospects. Something humbler, yet no less demanding in its own right, is called for at the present."
> ["Commonwealth," in *CONTEXT*, Martin E. Marty, 1/15/96]

The basic Christian affirmation is about the present and the future, not the past. It is that in Jesus Christ, God was doing a new thing in history. It is that God continues the process, continues to create newness. That's what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is about: not just the resuscitation of a dead body 2,000 years ago. That's history. But, the presence of a risen Christ in our life, creating new possibilities, making all things new, establishing justice, breaking down barriers, binding up wounds.

It is our best and most intriguing theology — and our most hopeful and joyful.

And so whatever it is that you and I struggle with in the present, the Christian word is that God is in it too, with us, as a creative energy, making new possibilities, doing new things. Sickness, depression, addiction, dependency — destructive relationships, unhealthy behavior — don't look back to how it used to be. Look for what new thing God is doing.

And whatever it is that frightens you about the future — the Christian word is that God's creation is not finished yet: the options are not exhausted: you are not finished yet. Don't look back. God is in the future — not the past.

I need that word when I read the morning paper, when I visit Cabrini-Green, when I stand by the bedside of a critically ill friend. God is in the future. The Kingdom is not here yet, not all of it. God is still creating.

The week before Christmas I traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to speak at the funeral of a dear friend and mentor, Arthur Romig. I've talked about him before. He was born in China of missionary parents, returned to China himself as a Presbyterian missionary, was incarcerated by the Japanese, returned to this country to be a pastor and presbytery executive. In one of his many retirements, he agreed to come on the staff of the church in Columbus, Ohio where I was a new pastor. We became close friends.

Art had a connection in Chicago. Helen, his wife, suffering from Alzheimers, who Art was caring for when he was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) this fall, was an artist. She had done rubbings of some ancient tombs in the South of China which were of interest to our Field Museum of Natural History. And so a few years ago, Art and Helen were in Chicago to present the rubbings. They stayed with us, and to celebrate we went to the Tang Dynasty Restaurant. I loved to hear Art speak Chinese, and the best way to get him to do that was to go to a Chinese restaurant and get him to order. So that is what we were doing. It seemed to me that Art and the waiter were having an increasingly animated conversation about something more than Won Ton soup. Suddenly the waiter disappeared into the kitchen and returned with another waiter and the cook. As it turned out — the three of them were students

at University of Illinois at Chicago, from the very village in the South of China where Art was a Presbyterian missionary. It was like old home week — they talked about people and places, to the absolute delight of all the other guests until the owner finally suggested that they might go back to work.

Several of us persuaded Art to publish his memoirs, which he did, and to publish some of his sermons, a project he struggled to complete after his diagnosis this fall.

The package containing the book of his sermons arrived in December, the week he died. Over a very frail signature he had written:

> "Dear Family and Friends,
> Let this be our early Christmas present, before my writing days are over and I am called to join the Eternal God, who is calling me through ALS.
> A blessed holiday season all the way into the new year of 1996.
> With love and best wishes,
> Art"

That is what it means to know a God of the present and the future. It is, I think, what the prophet meant:

> "Do not remember the former things,
> or consider the things of old.
> I am about to do a new thing;
> now it springs forth,
> do you not perceive it?"

The story of Jesus which begins with the event we read about this morning, his baptism in the Jordan River, is the story of God acting in human history. His baptism — for Jesus — was the event which marked his decision, his commitment, to put his life in God's hands.

And it is that to which you and I are invited: to trust God with our present and with our future.

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Eternal God, you are our beginning and our ending, and you are graciously present in every day of our lives, lovingly continuing your creation ... So, give us grace to trust you with our lives now, today, and in all the days ahead. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.